Danger level of radioactive waste debated

WHAT'S THERE?

Environmentalists and government officials spar over whether locally stored waste is low or high level.

By Mary Wozniak
Niagara Gazette

The question is: Is the Department of Energy on the level?

Inquiring minds want to know.

Timothy Henderson, president of Residents Organized for the Lewiston-Porter Environment, claims that back in 1983, the energy department quietly issued Order 5820, which reclassified the radioactive wastes at the Niagara Falls Storage Site in the Town of Lewiston as low level, thus enabling them to be landfilled.

That isn't true, a spokesman for the energy department says.

The energy department now wants to put a final cap, or an extra 4 feet of clay plus a layer of stone, on top of the clay cap covering the radioactive waste and residue, so it can be left there for 200 to 1,000 years. ROLE opposes the plan.

So does the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the state Department of Health and the state Department of Environmental Conservation. They say the current standard in use at the site to contain the high-level radioactive residues is not good enough. The only answer, they say, is removing the residues to a high-level radioactive waste repository, when one is built.

The 255,000 cubic yards of radioactive material is from the Manhattan Project, which created the first atomic bomb. The Lewiston site is about 10 miles from the City of Niagara Falls, near Lutts and Pletcher roads. The energy department will hold an "availability session," which it likens to an open house, not a public hearing, at the site from 4 to 7 p.m. Thursday.

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TODAY'S TOPIC: ENVIRONMENT

NIAGARA FALLS STORAGE SITE

What's buried there:

- Roughly two pounds of radium, or one-third of the world's mined supply.
- 250,000 cubic yards of radioactively contaminated materials (soil and sludge).
- 15,000 cubic yards of high-level residues from the processing of uranium ores. Most significant of these is 3,200 cubic yards of residues code-name K-65 wastes, with a half-life of 1,600 years.
- The K-65 wastes have half-life of 1,600 years. That means half of its radioactivity will be gone after 1,600 years, but it will still remain radioactive for a period of up to 16,000 years.
- If, hypothetically, such residues escaped into the environment , the radiation dosage to people would be so high that it would result in a risk of one in two people developing cancer, the EPA says.

Source: *Niagara Gazette, Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, EPA, State Health Department.*

Danger in waste debated

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Henderson's allegation about the reclassification of waste was contained in a guest editorial published by the Gazette in February. Congressman John J. LaFalce sent a copy of it to Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary in mid-March, along with a letter asking that the department review its decision for final disposition of the waste.

In the meantime, the energy department had contacted the National Academy of Sciences, an independent group of experts, and asked the academy to review its plan for the site.

The purpose of the academy review has not been made clear. Some officials say the academy will only review the technical data supporting the energy department's decision to put a final cap on the site.

Another said the academy will give a "risk assessment" of the plan.

One official said that if the academy decides the plan for a final cap is not safe for the surrounding environment and people, then the department will have to go back and review it.

LaFalce said in a prepared statement that the academy will give an opinion on the "validity" of the department's plan for a proposed permanent cap.

The people on the panel from the academy, whose names have not yet been released, are expected to tour the site on May 2 and 3. A public meeting with the panel will be planned at that time, the energy department said. A preliminary report from the academy is expected by September.

In his letter to O'Leary, LaFalce also asked that the energy department address the issues raised by Henderson in his opinion piece.

The allegation isn't new. Henderson got his information from James Rauch, an Amherst pharmacist, environmental activist and member of the Sierra Club-Niagara, who himself had made the same allegation in a 1984 letter to the editor published in The Buffalo News. Rauch also opposes the proposed final cap.

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James Rauch
Amherst activist

Rauch wrote that the energy department's action to reclassify the waste is against a Nuclear Regulatory Commission regulation labeled 10CFR61. The regulation specifically excludes uranium/thorium wastes and tailings, which are byproducts of the processing of uranium ore, from the low-level waste category, he wrote.

But Ronald E. Kirk, the energy department's site manager for the Lewiston site, said last week that Order 5820 dealt with how to manage wastes and "included low-level wastes as far as byproduct material."

The material at the Niagara Falls Storage Site "has never been classified as anything but byproduct material," Kirk said. Regulation 10CFR61 does allow for the land disposal of byproduct material, he said.

"It does include byproduct material but excludes byproduct material that is uranium and thorium tailings," Rauch said.

The problem is that the uranium tailings, or byproduct material, buried at the Lewiston site, are not domestic tailings but come from the Belgian Congo, Kirk said. And the radium content of the Belgian Congo tailings is as high as 60 percent, while domestic tailings are only at 1 or 2 percent, he said.

In fact, the 255,000 cubic yards of material buried in Lewiston contains roughly one-third of the world's mined supply of radium.

"These are special case ores" that do not belong in the low-level category, Rauch said. "I would take issue with Ron Kirk that this kind of disposal is adequate for a human-populated area that we live in."

What are uranium tailings from Africa doing in Lewiston and Niagara Falls? They were the property of the American subsidiary of a Belgian company, a major supplier of uranium ore to the U.S. during World War II, according to history records.

The U.S. energy department assumed ownership of them Aug. 26, 1983, in a $8 million cash and diplomatic deal with the firm, Afrimet-Indussa Inc., and the Belgium government.

Under terms of the agreement, the energy department accepted long-term responsibility for about 14,000 tons of residues stored at the Lewiston site and about 9,700 tons at a site in Fernald, Ohio. In return, Afrimet paid the U.S. $8 million, including $763,000 previously paid in storage and maintenance fees, at both sites over the previous 25 years.

A copyright article in the Gazette said that the settlement included "defense considerations" from the Belgium government. Foremost was the Belgians' willingness to allow Pershing II and cruise missiles on its soil, should the U.S. and Soviety governments fail to come to an arms limitations agreement, officials said.